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ABSTRACT

Students of English around the world are commonly taught according to one of two models, "British" English, and "American" English. Indeed, there is a persistent popular myth (present in many linguistics and second-language texts) that a single "Midwestern" variety of American English exists. The usage of the term "Midwest English" can be traced to the political ideology of the Yankees who settled around the Great Lakes region and promoted their dialect as "General American." Scholarship, however, shows that the Yankees' inland northern dialect is, in fact, confined to a small part of that region usually called the Midwest in the United States. The variation patterns of spoken English in this region are very complex. Demographics across the region are also highly complex, and dipthong variations are often extreme. The assumption that this region speaks a single dialect also ignores 60 years of research in dialect geography and urban sociolinguistics. A review of a few of the studies demonstrates that the so-called "Middle Western" part of the United States is home to several varieties of English and is not the linguistic monolith suggested by many handbooks. (HB)

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"MIDWESTERN" ENGLISH: U.S. AND WORLD PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to dispell the popular myth of a single "Midwestern" variety of American English, to account for the persistence of that myth, and to provide examples of actual varieties in the region. The use of phrases like "Midwest English" is common in linguistics and second-language texts around the world. This usage can be traced to the political ideology of the "Yankees" who settled the Great Lakes region, and to scholars who grew up in that region and promoted the Yankee dialect as "General American." Scholarship, however, shows that the Yankees' Inland Northern dialect is in fact confined to a small part of that region usually called "Midwest" in the United States. The assumption that this region speaks a single dialect ignores numerous works in dialect geography and sociolinguistics and ignores as well the ethnic and demographic diversity of the area.

Students of English around the world are commonly taught according to one of two models, "British" English, and "American."[1] The variety of British is readily identified: it is very close to RP and to the variety traditionally used on the BBC (at least until recently), based on the standard from London.

The source of "American English" used around the world these days is less clearly defined, for no single city or region has ever dominated American culture, and no single dialect has ever become an officially designated American standard. But it is not unusual for speech manuals which say anything at all about the variety of "American English" they present to remark that it competes with two regional varieties, "eastern" and "southern." This suggests that, contrary to facts, an "American Standard" has been agreed upon. And that standard is often associated with the American Middle West. Fromkin and Rodman's popular linguistics text (1983:249) describes the southern pronunciation of /ay/ as "regional" as compared to the "standard" pronunciation used in the "midwest" and other places. And when these manuals and commentators suggest that the handbook variety is that of the American "Middle West," some may interchangeably use a lable that was popular in the United States for a number of years: "General American." An example of this confusion in the international English-speaking community can be observed in the booklet <u>International English</u>, by Peter Trudgill and Jean Hannah. Both this booklet and the tape which accompanies it purport to be an introduction to the major varieties of English around the planet. But

the only American varieties on Trudgill and Hannah's tape are called "U.S. English -- Midwest" and "Eastern." A second example occurs in McCrum, Cran and MacNeil's (1986) popular The Story of English. On page 238 of this text, the caption to a map labelled "The Regions of American English" states that "as the first Americans headed westwards, their speech merged into the accents of 'General American,' the flat-vowelled speech of the Mid-West, the voice most of the world knows as American." More disturbing than the technical fuzziness of this characterization is the fact that it contradicts the very map it accompanies, which shows three distinct dialects (Northern, North Midland, South Midland) in the Northern interior of the United States, not, we emphasize, a geographically monolithic "general American."

What these authors ignore is the weight of sixty years of American scholarship in dialect geography and urban sociolinguistics. In this paper we will review just a few of the many studies which demonstrate that the so-called "Middle Western" part of the United States is home to several varieties of English and is not the linguistic monolith suggested by many handbooks; we will also attempt to account for the confusion between Inland Northern, one dialect spoken in part of the Middle West, and so-called "General American."

The myth of a single midwestern variety should have died in 1948. Beginning in that year a series of studies grounded in the Linguistic Atlas of North Central States -- by Alva Davis (1948), Albert Marckwardt (1957), Virginia McDavid (1957), Roger Shuy

(1962) and Robert Dakin (1971) -- established a complex series of lexical isoglosses which divided Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. Most of these isoglosses were grounded in rural vocabulary, especially in agricultural practices (e.g., haycock vs. hayshock) and foodways (Dutch cheese vs. smearcase), except for McDavid's work which examined regional preterites and participles for several dozen verbs (e.g., "dived" vs. "dove"). Publication of further studies based on Harold Allen's Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest (1973-1975) extended many of these isoglosses into Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska and the Dakotas.

All of these studies relied on interviews conducted between 1939 and 1960, the bulk of them in the early fifties. However, Craig Carver (1987,) using lexical data collected for the Dictionary of American Regional English between 1965 and 1970, found isogloss divisions throughout the Midwest which were similar to those established by earlier atlas studies. Tape recordings from that same project were examined by Timothy Frazer (1978) in the first geographical study of Midwestern pronunciation; this study identified six upland Southern pronunciation features which extended well into the central parts of Illinois and Indiana. Meanwhile, studies of Missouri by Rachel Faries and Donald Lance (forthcoming) have shown that elements of Northern, Midland, and Southern speech are found throughout that state.[2]

The variation patterns of spoken English in this region are so complex, however, that simple isogloss divisions do not tell everything. Speech islands turn up in Nebraska, Minnesota,

Illinois and Missouri. In the iron range of Minnesota, Mike Linn (1990) has found a variety of English marked by consonant cluster reduction, elimination of medial /t/ and /d/, consonant devoicing, and expressions like "Wanna go Detroit"?[3] In southwestern Illinois and the lower Missouri Valley, English in this German settlement area is marked by fewer upland Southern features than shown by the surrounding area (Frazer 1979).

This intense variety often leads to confusion and sometimes derogation among Midwesterners themselves. A Wisconsin native visiting southern Illinois might ask for the "bubbler," but might well die of thirst before anyone realized she was asking for a drinking fountain. St. Louisans who visit Chicago might ask for a "soda" but would receive an ice cream drink rather than a Pepsi or Mountain Dew. A visitor from Minneapolis might be shocked to see a sign in a St. Louis laundromat reading "warsher broke," but Tom Murray (forthcoming) has documented this spelling pronunciation.

Residents of Decatur, Jacksonville, or East St. Louis in Illinois are routinely told they have a "Southern accent" when they visit friends in Chicago, while Chicago students who travel south to attend college at Urbana, Charleston or Macomb will be puzzled by the Midland expressions like "the car needs washed" or, as the map in the handout shows, positive "anymore" (Murray forthcoming). And while Indiana natives proudly call themselves "Hoosiers," in St. Louis this term is an insult (Murray 1986).

The demographics of this region are so complex, moreover,

that regional variants often end up side by side in the same community. This juxtaposition has often led to the adoption of former regionalisms as social variants. Tim Habick's study of Farmer City, Illinois -- a small farming community only twenty minutes' drive from Champaign -- revealed a community with Northern, Southern, and Midland dialect features. However, high school young people put them to a surprising use. On reaching high school, Farmer City adolescents split into two hostile social groups, one embracing the middle-class values of hard work, academic and athletic success, the other group embracing the values of the hippie/drug culture of the sixties. Habick found that the latter group, who called themselves the "burn-outs," adopted a vowel system very different from that of their peers. In the burnouts' system, high and mid-back vowels are subjected to extreme fronting. This fronting phenomenon traditionally occurs in Midland and Southern dialects, but Farmer City young people used the process, in a way utterly divorced from original regional identity, to mark group identity (Habick 1992).

A second case of social adaptation appears in the diphthong of ground, downtown, house, which takes a great variety of phonetic shapes in many dialects and international varities of English. In the midwest, this diphthong is pronounced in some places with a lax low-central onset, while elsewhere the onset is tense and raised and fronted, sometimes as high as /e/ (often, the glide is reduced as well). In McDonough County, Illinois, Frazer (1983) found that the tense/fronted onset behaved like a

classical sound change among subjects who grew up during the Great Depression -- women's use of the fronted onset was almost exactly a generation ahead of the men. At the same time, however, the fronted onset also correlated most closely with rural identity, although among the youngest generation in the study it was making inroads among townsfolk.

Murray (1990), however, found an entirely different adaptation of this feature. Among students at Kansas State University, the fronted onset had become a social marker for members of Greek organizations, but was barely used at all by independents.

The examples given up to this point do not present the full range of English variation in the Middle Western United States, but we hope they will serve as illustrations of a region which is full of variation and is decidedly not the home of a single dialect.

We have so far neglected examples of urban dialect studies conducted in the Midwestern region, especially those dealing with Black English, including Pederson (1964) and Herndobler/Sledd (1976) in Chicago, Wolfram et. al. in Detroit (1969). (1976). But without taking time to discuss the features of Midwestern Black English, we think it is important to discuss some of the attitudes toward Black English taken by a number of midwesterners. In 1979, a group of African-American parents in Ann Arbor, Michigan, successfully brought a suit against the local school board, arguing that Ann Arbor pubic school teachers were insensitive to the dialect of Black students; as a result of the suit,

teachers were required to undergo special training in African-American dialects (Labov 1982). More recently, Timothy Riney (forthcoming) approached the superintendant of schools in Waterloo Iowa, a small city with a large working-class Black population. When Riney inquired what provisions had been made to prepare teachers for coping with students who spoke Black English, he was informed that no such dialect existed in Waterloo schools. The sort of denial expressed by Waterloo administrators and the lapse indicated by the Ann Arbor school district named in the suit point to a salient attitude on the part of Midwesterners -- it can be summed up as "we don't have an accent. We don't have a dialect." We have some personal experience with this attitude, for when Frazer and his wife began teaching in central Illinois, Ms. Frazer -- a native Southerner -- was congratulated by a colleague on having lost her Southern accent and learning to speak "perfect Midwestern." And in the widely distributed dialect video American Tongues, a resident of central Ohio tells the camera (about the language of his community): "We're straight American. We're bland. We're just the normal stuff right here."

While many speakers may perceive their own speech as "normal," American Midwesterners are particularly stubborn in doing so. Why this attitude persists and why "Midwestern English" is regarded as normative by many in the textbook industry as well will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Part of the problem comes from the myth of "General American," which arose more than sixty years ago. The term was popu-

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larized by J.S. Kenyon, whose volumes on American Pronunciation (1924, 1930) and whose contributions to the second edition of Webster's Second New International Dictionary gave him a wide audience. Kenyon wildly overestimated the number of "General American" speakers at ninety million, a number belied by the 1920 census (Frazer forthcoming) which showed that too many other people would speak other dialects even if such a thing as "General American" existed. Yet "General American" pronunciation continued as a label for many years after Linguistic Atlas studies demonstrated its baselessness; it was used in widely adopted media manuals like the NBC Pronunciation Guide (Bender 1943) so that "General American" became a norm for broadcasters and film actors after World War II.

The pronunciation system of "General American," however, was actually that of a regional dialect, Inland Northern, the dialect of Cleveland, Ohio, where Kenyon was based at Hiram college. As linguistic atlas studies show, Inland Northern is used only in those parts of the Middle West which adjoin the great lakes and part of the Dakotas; what Kurath called the "Midland" dialect --actually not a single dialect but a mixture of dialects which migrated westward from Pennsylvania and the upland South -- is much more widespread than Inland Northern in the Middle Western United States.

Why did Kenyon declare Inland Northern to be "General American"? After all, at the time American Pronunciation first ap-

peared, many Americans believed upper-class New England speech to be a model for power and prestige; before World War II, broadcasters and many Hollywood actors used a non-rhotic dialect like that of Boston, Massachusetts. But Kenyon was coming from a different tradition. The Inland Northern dialect was brought to the Midwest by a highly ideological group of pioneers who came west from upstate New York and western New England early in the nineteenth century, a group called "Yankees" by historians. These direct descendants of the New England Puritans were elitist and ethnocentric, and their church-based system of community organization is a commonplace of midwestern social histories. As Thomas J. Morain writes, "one of the most distinguishing features of the Yankees of the nineteenth century had been their confidence that theirs was a superior vision and that America's future depended on their ability to impose their order on the life of the nation. . .[and they] set out to 'save America' by converting the West to their standards" (1988:256).

The Yankees populated areas of the Middle West often by transplanting entire communities from New York or Vermont as colonies in Ohio, Michigan,. Wisconsin or Illinois. The colonies often founded colleges to promote the colony's religions ideals; colleges which survive this movement are Knox in Galesburg, Illinois; Dension in Granville, Ohio; Marietta and Beloit in cities in Ohio and Wisconsin by the same names. Inland Northern thus became the language of higher education in the Middle West, and would have been the benchmark dialect in normal schools which

prepared teachers for the Midwest's growing school system.

Not suprisingly, Yankee attitudes toward their new Midwestern neighbors, especially the upland Southerners, were condescending. In McLean County, Illinois, according to an early (1879) county history, "the Northerner thought of the Southerner as a lean, lank, lazy creature, burrowing in a hut and rioting in whiskey, dirt, and ignorance" (McLean County 1879: 97). And this attitude extended to language as well. From southeastern Indiana in 1833, Yankee Reverend R. J. Wheelock wrote that the school where his wife taught used "the most improved N.E. school-books" and that he looked forward to "correcting 'a heap' of Kentuckyisms" (Power 1953:114).

It is not hard to understand how a group who promoted their own language and values so aggressively should have succeeded in promoting their own dialect as normative, and why this attitude should have influenced scholars like Kenyon. Geneva Smitherman, after all, has recently pointed out -- in speaking of Black English -- how powerfully ideology has affected past linguistic scholarship (1988). This effect is also evident in the case of Inland Northern and "General American." The belief in the superiority of Yankee culture had become entrenched by the turn of the century, and was espoused by historians as eminent as Frederic Jackson Turner (Curti 1959:138). So it is not surprising that Kenyon should promote his own dialect as "General American."

The English dialect presented in manuals as "American Eng-

lish" is in fact a regional dialect -- Inland Northern (for

descriptions and distribution of Inland Northern see Kurath 1949, Kurath & McDavid 1982). But the Inland Northern dialect is not found everywhere in the Midwest; it is largely confined to the southern shores of the Great Lakes and to the dialect islands of the small cities that were once Yankee colonies. Inland Northern, in short, cannot be called "Midwestern English" -- there is no such thing. And people learning English around the world should be aware that if they learn the "Midwestern" version of American English found in their text books, they will find themselves linguistically at home in the middle class suburbs of Cleveland, Detroit, or Milwaukee, but if they visit the iron range of Minnesota, the hills and prairies of Southern Illinois, or the river towns of Ohio, they should be prepared for some surprises.

NOTES

1. Indian English, of course, may become in time a third model.

2. The map which accompanies this paper is a composite of isoglosses (dialect bourndaries) from several of the regional studies cited in the text. Line a - a, the "Northern-Midland" boundary famous among dialectologists, was based on several hundred linguistic atlas interviews. This line would roughly represent contrasting usage between stone and rock, quarter to and quarter till the hour, /a/ vs. "open o" in long, pail vs. bucket, darning needle vs. snakefeeder, eaves troughs vs. gutters or spouts, as well as several items cited in the text. The linguistic atlas did not chart other items, like positive "anymore" and elliptical infinitive complements to the verb need, but line a-a could serve as well as a boundary for these Midland items.

Line b - b serves as a northern boundary of Upland Southern (or South Midland) pronunciations in ground, due, crash, cough, him and them. These pronunciations would not, however, occur in speech island c.

Carver's Wisconsin isoglosses (d) include a north-south

division formed by tainted milk, exchange work, curdled milk and it's snowing down South (your slip is showing). The east-west boundary is formed by whipple tree, marsh hay, clunker, filled donut, and gentleman cow, among others in the east, and branch, long handles, and male cow in the west. These last terms come from the South by way of the Mississippi river which forms Wisconsin's western boundary; the east is set apart by early connection with New England (via the Great Lakes waterways) and heavy German settlement. The latter brought to eastern Wisconsin kraut, speck (bacon), and berliner (a pastry). Features of the Iron Range (e) are presented in the text.

3. The Iron Range also shares features like the rendition of the "th" fricative as /t/ or /d/ with working class white neighborhoods in Chicago and other cities.

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A Variation Map of Spoken English in the Midwestern U.S.

a - a Northern-Midland Dialect Boundary (after Davis 1948, Shuy 1962, Allen 1973 -)

b - b Northern limit of Upper South Pronunciation (Frazer 1978)

c German/Northern speech island (Frazer 1979)

d Wisconsin isoglosses (Carver 1987, forthcoming)

e Iron range of Minnesota (Linn 1990)

dots represent positive responses to "Anymore, do you go to church. . . .?"
numbers represent responses in towns and cities (Murray forthcoming)